

## LITERATURE AND LANGUAGE IN AN EFL CLASSROOM

MADHAVI GODAVARTHY

College of Arts and Sciences for Women, Al Qurayat, Al-Jouf University, Saudi Arabia

### ABSTRACT

The shift of importance from literature to language has made its presence felt but at the same time created a vacuum. This vacuum is felt by many teachers who believe that a literary piece *does* cater to today's needs. Literature need not be fully separated from English language. When one is eligible to say literature is life and life is literature, we may also bridge the historic gap between literature and language in the classroom by saying, literature is language and language is not just literal but also literary. Our aim is to make the student learn language and also something more from the content-rich material.

The literature component has that capacity to mould the 'personality' of the student. So the effort is to make a meaningful union of two theories namely the 'stylistic' approach that helps us comprehend the forms of language and the 'reader-response theory' that focuses on how the reader interacts with the text. For the student to become a global citizen, both are necessary.

**KEYWORDS:** EFL Classroom, Literature and Language, Stylistic Approach, Reader-Response Method

### INTRODUCTION

The shift of importance from literature to language has made its presence felt but at the same time created a vacuum. This vacuum is felt by many teachers who believe that a literary piece *does* cater to today's needs. Literature need not be fully separated from English language learning especially at the undergraduate levels aiming at technological studies. Some universities have included literary pieces, but they seldom aim at triggering the students' abilities to understand the literary perspective. The question is in what way does this understanding help? It makes them able not only in terms of language acquisition but also in terms of understanding life. When one is eligible to say literature is life and life is literature, we may also bridge the historic gap between literature and language in the classroom by saying, literature is language and language is not just literal but also literary.

Ironically, many institutions also organize 'personality development' courses which of course benefit the students. But it should also be realized that an English classroom has the potential to prepare the student in terms of personality and also in terms of improving linguistic capabilities to face the globalised world which demands intercultural- competence.

The point is, the student can be offered a comprehensive course book which not only improves their language skills but also hones their sensibilities. With the establishment of English language labs, the field of the teaching learning process has widened for the teacher and the taught. Multimedia integration in the English classroom and ICT also has gained immense significance.

Our aim is to make the student learn language and also something more from the content-rich material. Now the question is 'what is this something more?' This is the idea that can empower the English classrooms as part of preparing the student to face the global competition. The EFL learners should also prepare themselves not just for communicative

competence but also for comprehending and using the nuances, creativity and versatility of language. Then they learn how to use language in discourse in various social and cultural contexts.

Kinneavy's Communication Triangle has the encoder (the speaker/writer), the decoder (audience/reader), reality (the outer world) and the triangle itself which represents the text. If the writer's aim is self-expression, then it is *expressive discourse*, if the writer's aim is persuading the reader or convince the reader, then it is *persuasive research*, if the writer's aim is discuss reality, then the discourse is a presentation of reality and it becomes *referential discourse*, if the writer intends to give pleasure and the "stress is on the internal ordering of the formal characteristics of the message", then it is *literary discourse*. (<http://www.sadasae.com/Pages/17%20GS%20Methods%20and%20Purposes.htm>)

So these are the basics of discourse and if the students are prescribed texts which can cater to all these departments, then an ample scope will be given to them in developing and improving each of the areas of discourse. The authentic material may be adjusted according to the level of the students. This in turn facilitates both the stylistic and the response methods.

An authentic text has a wider field and scope to educate the student as the poet (if it's a poem) has created the poem from the material of life. Learning the target language can be made more interesting by exploring this rich arena in terms of vocabulary, grammar and variations in syntax. Drawing the students' attention to the sound, rhythm and intonation will help them realize the phonological aspects.

## METHODOLOGY

As the literature component has that capacity to mould the 'personality' of the student, the effort is to make a meaningful union of two theories namely the 'stylistic' approach that helps us comprehend the forms of language and the 'reader-response theory' that focuses on how the reader interacts with the text. For the student to become a global citizen, both are necessary. The processes help to affect feelings and enhance cognition and motivation. Thus by 'feeling', 'learning language' and also by being motivated, the student assists his 'ideal self' in its growth and improvement.

Using stylistics as a tool to interpret literature is an exercise to understand the formal aspects of a poem like the usage of the words and their lexical importance, the implications of specific use of punctuation and turn-taking if there is any. So the aspects of grammar, phonology, discourse and vocabulary are stressed upon thus meeting the objectives of instruction of teaching students in an EFL setting, in order to find out 'not just what a text means, but also how it comes to mean what it does' (Short: 1996)

Research by influential scholars like Stanley Fish, Louis M. Rosenblatt and Wolfgang Iser has shifted the attention from the text to the reader and further research has also stated the benefits of this method in the second language acquisition. Davis discusses the potential applications of the theory to foreign language pedagogy. He stressed on the aspect of the process that takes place "during" the reading of the text (1989:423). Liaw (2001) has studied the effects of the theory in an EFL class. He opines that "...the use of literature if taught in a response-based manner need not be a vehicle only for language but also for aesthetic experience that enhances the enjoyment of reading in a foreign language." (43) So teaching of language through a particular text is more relevant when the students are able to relate to the text in terms of their own experience and understanding. This way their language learning goals may also be reached when the students 'like' what they do. According to Virginia Scott "Invoking the interpretive mode is one of the most creative ways to make a text personal to all kinds of learners. Every student in a classroom can come to appreciate a text on his or her own level."

([http://www.learner.org/workshops/tfl/session\\_01/](http://www.learner.org/workshops/tfl/session_01/))

At the same time, the language teacher also needs to work towards the common goals of the students. That is, 'preparing' them to read and focus on the text. The tension between the two varied goals of language acquisition and personality development through the 'aesthetic' experience has to be met by the teacher. Hanauer says: It is the task of the teacher "to motivate, to contextualize and to individualize often anxious and insecure readers' experiences of texts to promote pleasure and understanding" (Hall 2003: 398) the dichotomy between the two aspects may be bridged by the teacher by helping and assisting the student to 'row' between the two banks.

Keeping in view the EFL setting, the selection of the text should take into consideration the difficulty levels of the students. In fact, the teacher can also select from a wide ranging set of authentic material like a video, articles, web-site, art-work, a painting and so on if he/she is considering supplementary activities.

## ACTIVITIES

The students can be involved in focusing on these aspects by being involved in activities. The teachers usually encounter mixed ability classes and so paired or group activities may be more productive. This results in the 'co-construction of meaning'. Instead of 'teaching' the poem, an attempt may be made to prepare the student to comprehend the poem and the poet's message. The initiation-response-evaluation method may be followed or it can also integrate a 'follow-up' by the students. This may not be usually found in an EFL setting as the students initially take time to break their barriers to speak in a group. The inductive or deductive methods may be employed according to the context and need as most of the times it is an unfamiliar text.

Creating an interest helps the student settle with the poem. Students who are in the technical stream are a mixed lot. For some a language class is a 'get away' from their 'monotony' and for some it is an important class in terms of academic achievement. The teacher can make herself/ himself adaptable to both, i.e. in terms of retaining their interest levels. The poem also is multidimensional. One dimension is the areas of language that is its physical side and the other is the intellectual. As such what is required is the whole for a person to get the optimum benefit.

We can take up activities which can make the student think. Including activities in the teaching-learning process benefits the students. (Hanauer 2001; Maley and Duff 1989) It can begin with 'pre-reading' activities or warmers like guessing about the poem's theme with the help of its title, some words from the poem can be given to the students and they can be asked to give their meaning and relate them to the theme they have guessed. This can be done in pairs or groups and later the ideas can be shared on a common platform. The 'top-down-reading process' reduces complexity as the teacher proceeds from main ideas, difficult words and phrases and so on. The teacher can make use of quizzes and questionnaires for better negotiation of meaning. But at the same time, a balance needs to be achieved between the teacher-centered and learner-centered sessions with stress on the latter. This facilitates understanding individual differences, learning goals and also the difficulties of slow-learners.

Warming-up activities initiate the journey into the poem. A picture connected to the theme of the poem can be shown to the students and they can be encouraged to speak in pairs and then to the teacher about what the picture means to 'them'. The teacher need not include language component in this process so that the students can just concentrate on the theme. They can be involved in a discussion and also in a question session among themselves. This along with the frequent intervention of the teacher sets the ground for them to understand and analyze a poem.

These ideas can be shared and parallels, comparisons and contrasts may be drawn to the poet's ideas. The students can also be given parts of some sentences for discussions. The students can also be encouraged to predict and infer some

ideas. Gradually the poem and the poet can be brought to the fore. These activities encourage the students to think, organize their ideas and speak or write. Then comes the question of involvement levels of the students.

The class can be divided into groups and given a part of the poem like one stanza or even a couple of lines. Then the students are given a task of studying the words and segregating them according to their meaning (sometimes the guessed one) to form vocabulary webs. They can also be asked to segregate words according to their grammatical function like nouns, verbs, etc. They can also be asked to circle the unfamiliar words and later guess their meanings from the context. But at the same time it need not be a rigorous stylistic study as such keeping in view the requirements of an EFL classroom. The selection of the text also plays an important role in making the student comfortable to achieve the required result.

Another method could be reading out the poem in its entirety and asking the students to close their texts. The teacher can then begin a guess game or a memory game and ask students to recall words, repetitions if any and so on. As the theme has already been initiated, the students are already prepared to recall some words and they are also being able to connect to the theme.

The teacher can proceed to explain the poem. The students can then be grouped and asked to write down a few questions on the stanza or lines given to them. Then each of the groups poses the questions to the other group. This activity facilitates in analyzing the poem and also gives the teacher a scope to comprehend the degree of understanding of the students. Comprehension activity by the teacher also helps with questions like “Who is ‘I’ in the poem?” or “Why does the poet use ‘past tense’ in the second stanza?” and so on.

Figures of speech and poetic devices also play a significant role and they need to be treated specially in an EFL setting. The students may be drawn to the special effect created by the poet and the students can be encouraged to make sentences using a symbol, a simile, and so on. They can also be encouraged to write one-liners or two-liners with a particular theme. Thus they get a chance to personally respond to the material and also do something on and of their own. They not only comprehend but also interpret the text to try out their application.

Scaffolding helps the teacher provide assistance to the student in completing a difficult activity like ‘reading between the lines’ of the poem for a special meaning or identifying some peculiar or special usages by the poet or how it is relevant to their lives. Gradually, the teacher withdraws her/his help and the students test their areas of creative and critical thinking. Such an exercise allows them to differentiate between denotative and connotative language. According to Schultz “...the reader’s participation in the dynamics of the text on an individual basis is important precisely for the *changes* textual interaction provoke *within* him” (2001:11) (*italics in the original*) So the students’ interpretation may become a part of his/her thinking processes and might bear the capacity to affect feelings. This may result in an aesthetic reconstruction of personality.

Students can also be encouraged to bring pictures connected to the poem or even draw pictures for the poem. The pictorial representations deliver their own levels of involvement and satisfaction of the student. They can also be given a quiz by the teacher with ‘easy’ and ‘difficult’ questions to test them in the areas of language and meaning. . The teacher’s rubric; an assessment tool may include criteria to judge the student in terms of vocabulary, pronunciation, comprehension, interpretation and creativity.

The question is how the refined structures in a poem help a student in learning ‘speaking skills’.

The students may not be capable of using high vocabulary, but they are exposed to a specific use of language throughout the teaching-learning process and this understanding and interpretation helps them in improving their existing vocabulary to express themselves. This will also help them in improving the other important dimensions of communication like listening skills, reading and writing skills.

A questionnaire can also be given to the students to know their response and to identify difficult areas if any.

### Questions

- *What is it that you liked in the poem? Why?*
- *Is there anything that you do not agree with in the poem?*
- *Does the poem remind you of any situation in your life?*
- *Would you wish to explain the poem to the class in your own words?*
- *Can you guess why the poet has written this poem?*
- *Can you name some famous poets of your country?*
- *In which situations would you use the following words in the poem?*
- *Have you enjoyed reading this poem? Why?*
- *Which lines from the poem would you wish to remember?*
- *What do you think are the difficulties in reading this poem?*
- *Think and write two situations in which you can quote from this poem.*

### CONCLUSIONS

Thus by making the literary piece a vehicle for stylistics and response method, the students are trained by being equipped with segments of form and structure and also with the literary nuances of the poem; a 'real material' that has the potential of connecting them to life.

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